THE INS AND THE OUTS
Matthew 15:21-28 TEV
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There is no more painful experience than rejection; to be "in" one moment and "out" the next. It can happen in a variety of ways, sometimes petty, trivial: engaging in light, social conversation and suddenly sensing that the person with whom you are talking is no longer listening, but instead is shifting attention to a point eight degrees over your right shoulder where somebody more important is standing. Sometimes it is more serious business: a notice from a university that you were not admitted, a defeat at the polls, a demotion to second string, being overlooked for an appointment you particularly wanted. Professional baseball players often suffer traumatic grief when the team for which they have played for ten years suddenly trades them, with about as much sentiment as trading in a used car. At the executive level in business, that dynamic happens with enough frequency to stimulate a bit of paranoia. One day you're in; the next day you're told you are no longer needed: thank you, your job is abolished, you're out.

Sometimes rejection happens for reasons beyond the control of the person being rejected. My young friends this summer, while participating in a Seminar on Peace at Iona, became quite agitated when they sensed that their views weren't being taken seriously because of their age. Young people don't like that whenever it happens and I don't blame them. Those of us on the far side of thirty didn't like it at all when the radical student revolutionaries of the last decade suggested that we were not to be trusted. The elderly resent, rightfully, rejection which comes with age. Blacks will no longer passively accept rejection based on race. Women have been excluded, but no longer.

It is always a threatening, painful experience to be rejected. The second most frequently stolen book in the New York Public Library system is Emily Post. The most frequently stolen book is the Bible. Both have to do with rejection and acceptance. (See Ernest Campbell, Locked in a Room with Open Doors, p.13).

And sometimes rejection is experienced at a deep level which can only be described as theological. Sigmund Freud taught that feelings of guilt and inadequacy have their genesis in the infant fear of rejection by parents. An infant is profoundly influenced, Freud believed, by the fear of losing the parent's love. Rejection is the constant threat. One of the most helpful insights I ever encountered was Paul Tournier's suggestion that people have always projected that psycho-dynamic into their relationship with God, with disastrous results. What a wilderness, what a wasteland, to go through life thinking that God withholds His love, acceptance, that our Creator rejects us - His children. If rejection is that hurtful, and the threat of rejection that powerful, obviously we will work very hard to avoid it.

The way we protect ourselves is by belonging to a tribe, a community in which we belong, in which there is no question about our acceptability. It's interesting, sometimes amusing, sometimes embarassing, to dig around in your memory and identify your various tribes and the ways they provided the safety of acceptance and a sense of identity for you. Martin A. Marty, University of Chicago historian and Lutheran theologian, has written a delightful and touching memoir called "By Way of Response" in which he talks about his formative community and its importance. His happened to be a Lutheran church in a rural community in Minnesota. Marty is sharply critical of people who forget the importance of their tribe. During a speaking engagement at a Roman Catholic university one time,

"some students cheered a blasphemously furious ex-priest who was scorning Mother Church." Marty writes, "I asked them why the applause. 'You'll never understand', said one, 'what an identity crisis the Catholic Church gave each one of us.' I wondered aloud if they knew how lucky they were ever to have belonged to anything that was potent enough to give them an identity over which to have a crisis." (p.19).

The tribe gives identity and a place for security and personal acceptance. The tribe also, by its very nature, is in the business of rejecting outsiders. What a pity! The very community that tells me who I am, does so by telling me who I am not. What a profound but healthy shock occurred when the people whites had used for hundreds of years to define who they were and were not, looked across that barrier of deep cultural racism so subtle we weren't even aware of it, and said very simply, "Black is beautiful". Marty comments..."The legacy of most tribes is mixed. Four centuries after the Reformation we did still fight battles against the Pope. But the people of the Pope, who we were taught was the very Antichrist, never did anything worse than storm down the hill from Guardian Angels School to defeat the basketball teams of the true visible church on earth." (p.23). The tribe bestows a sense of identity and performs the very important social function of insulating the individual from the threat of rejection.

The tongue-in-cheek best seller of the year was The Official Preppy Handbook edited by a very enterprising and now very wealthy Lisa Birback. The book describes how to be "in" in a way that is amusing and always on the periphery of the truth. The introduction, titled, appropriately, "Initiation" reads, "It is the inalienable right of every man, woman and child to wear khaki. Looking, acting, and ultimately being Prep is not restricted to an elite minority lucky enough to have an ancestor or two on the Mayflower. You don't even have to be a registered Republican. In a true Democracy everyone can be upper class and live in Connecticut. It's only fair!" (p.11).

There are chapters on Proper Pets (Labrador Retrievers have it all over Poodles), schools, courses, sports, vacations, cars, what to smoke, drink, wear and how to spend leisure time. It is, according to the handbook, ultimately a matter of taste and tact. If you have it, you're in. If you learn it, you may get in. If you don't and/or won't, you're out, forever.

Fun, half true, good summer reading. Except for the fact that the reverse side is rejection: that this and every tribe exists in a sense by defining who doesn't qualify to get in. There is a sense in which a person who takes Jesus Christ seriously can never be totally comfortable with that. We may laugh at it, participate in it, but for people who know a little about Jesus it causes a nagging twitch in the soul that won't go away.

It is easy for religion to become a tribe. Judaism, as institution, struggled with it across the centuries. In the very beginning, their identity as God's people was itself a demarcation line between Israel and the rest of the human race. The intent was not to be exclusive, but the tension was unceasing. Rituals of cleanliness, rules about diet and hygiene contributed to the survival of the nation and the highly developed sense of identity. Conversely, the same cultic apparatus could be used to categorize those outside as unclean, unacceptable.

Jesus encountered it consistently in His ministry. Almost immediately He got in trouble by breaking down the barriers His people used for their own sense of acceptability and their rejection of the rest of the world. Our text this morning,

for instance, tells about an incident involving a Canaanite woman. She was a Gentile, unclean, clearly an outsider. She came to Jesus to intercede for a sick daughter who is described as "possessed by a demon". The point of this story, however, is not demon possession nor miraculous healing, but how Jesus dealt with this Gentile, this outsider. It's an interesting incident. Let's look at it.

The woman asked for help and His first response was to do and say nothing. His disciples, on the other hand, begged Him to send her away. One has to wonder what there was about this woman so offensive that they begged Him not to get involved. Was she a threat to their identity because she was an outsider? A second time she came and knelt and asked for help. This time, after an aside about the lost sheep of Israel, He said something that sounds barbaric, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." This was a strong resourceful woman and she kept at it..."even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." He liked that, apparently. He called her a person of great faith, and her daughter was healed.

Scholars have long pondered the meaning of Jesus' harsh response. I think He was being sarcastically literal about the exclusiveness of religion. I think people did regard her as a little better than a stray dog. I think He verbalized the worst, most arrogant, stereotype He could, precisely to hold it up to the purifying light of God's love. There is a sense in which the most effective antidote to the worst racism or sexism is simply to bring it out in the open to expose it to light and common sense.

We can see, in retrospect that He consistently was expanding the borders of God's Kingdom: no cozy restrictive club for Him, but the whole human race is involved: no exclusive priesthood but fishermen and housewives and tax collectors and soldiers and prostitutes.

The early Christian church, in its best moments, followed Him. It vaulted the barrier between Jew and Gentile, Roman and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Its literature is breathtaking in scope and expansiveness. "Let no one boast..." St. Paul wrote, "all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present of the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3:21-23).

What a stain in human history when Christian people have forgotten the expansiveness and open-armed acceptance of their Lord. How sad that we have in the past begun our conversations with other religions, not with the acceptance of Jesus, but the reverse: the assumption that our truth is the whole truth and that failure to adopt it consigns one eternally to hell. Is there a more arrogant proposition than that? Martin Marty addresses the traditional Christian approach to Evangelism with unflinching integrity. He writes: "We were working with an image of God that itself remained tribalist. God was a predator who sent us out to prey on others. Though the divine is boundless, we were in a boundary-building profession in the name of God." (op.cit., p. 54).

The business of Christian religion is to raise the ceiling and expand the walls and let light in. In society, our business is to cultivate divine discomfort and perhaps guilt with tribalism that rejects human beings on any basis - color, religion, age, sex: to oppose sometimes and at other times to laugh at the silliness of exclusive tribal tradition. In church, followers of Jesus will cultivate relentless discomfort at rituals and customs that shut out, restrict, excommunicate,

consign to hell, outsiders who happen to be different and to answer the theological arrogance of those who are certain they know the names on the guest list at the heavenly banquet and they're on it and you aren't with the gracious patience they have yet to encounter in religion.

It requires conversion, which sometimes means merely bringing to the surface the truth we have always known but have kept buried, hidden even, from outselves. My guess is that even in the middle of working very hard to be accepted by others, we are plagued by the nagging possibility that once we're in, we'll still feel out. My guess is that everyone who ever read I'm OK, You're OK knew that you don't feel "OK" about yourself because someone tells you that you should. My guess is that no one ever became his or her own best friend because they read a book or were told that it is possible. My guess, refined through experience, is that we know that the acceptance we want and need is not available, ultimately, through relationships with others. Conversion may begin for us when we face that: when we acknowledge that social acceptability is not salvation.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is radical. It proclaims a truth so fundamental and so clear that it gets lost, particularly in the institutional and cultural trappings of the church. It is that in Jesus Christ God has reached over the wall between the divine and the human: that the gap is closed: that God is vulnerable and accessible and that in Jesus Christ He loves and accepts and that people have the incredible privilege of living their lives in that love and acceptance. Christianity, at its best, is about grace. It is about a Canaanite woman accepted and her daughter restored across an ancient wall of racial and religious exclusiveness. It is about a homesick and lonely son, returning and met on the road and embraced before he can get his fumbling confession out. At its best Christianity is about grace - about men and women who are being set free by Jesus Christ from the silly games of tribalism, to live life as God wants it to be lived.

A group of us experienced something of that this summer when we arrived on the remote Island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. We were tired, physically and emotionally, and anxious about where we were. The first evening we worshipped in the Abbey, built in the 13th century, on a spot where Irish monks came in the 6th century. I was moved to recall that they had come because they were exiles - and the community they built would therefore be an accepting, welcoming home for all. Something about grace happened to us as we sang to the ancient Irish tune...

"Lord of all kindliness,
Lord of all grace,
Your hands swift to welcome,
Your arms to embrace..."

"Christian faith," Paul Tillich used to say, "is the act of accepting the fact that you are accepted by God." That little formula is more complicated than it sounds. But it does convey the good news. The good news is that God loves us - just as we are. He has made the outs "ins": the rejected are accepted. He is there at our waking and working and homing and sleeping. And His peace will be there - at the end of the day.

Amen.